DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 188 583 IR 008 433

AUTHOR Foster, Allan: Akeroyd, John
TITLE The Current Use of Online Services in U.K. Academic Libraries.
PUB DATE Dec 79
NOTE 15p.: Paper presented at the International Online Information Meeting (3rd, London, England, December 4-6, 1979).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Libraries: *Budgeting: *Fees: Higher Education: *Information Retrieval: Information Services: Library Surveys: *Online Systems: Use Studies

ABSTRACT

This update of a survey taken by the authors in April 1978 on the use of online services in British academic libraries (Online Review: v3 n2 p195-204 1979) concentrates on the following areas: (1) general pattern of use: (2) current arguments for charging users for online services: (3) current academic library practice on charging: (4) specific pricing policies, including partial cost recovery, full cost recovery, token charging, differential charges, loss leader pricing, and free searching: (5) the relationship between charging and the marketing of online services: and (6) staffing structures. The report concludes with a general evaluation of the role of online services in England's academic libraries. (FM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED188583

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

THE CURRENT USE OF ONLINE SERVICES IN U.K. ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

by

Allan Foster

and

John Akeroyd

Paper presented at the 3rd International Online Information Meeting, 4-6 December 1979, London.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J. Akeroyd

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

IR008433

1. INTRODUCTION

The growth of online information retrieval services in general and their use in academic libraries is now well documented. This paper is an attempt to update a survey conducted by the authors in April 1978 on the current state of the use of online services in UK academic libraries. (1) Recent data has been collected on several issues in this area from discussions with a number of individual academic librarians, some of whom have been involved in online information retrieval over a long period.

In particular the authors decided to concentrate on some key questions that are of great concern to academic librarians (in the UK and elsewhere) operating and managing reference and information services. Specifically, these are problems of charging and budgeting for online services; the management structures applicable to online services in an academic library; and finally a general evaluation of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with online services over a period of time as expressed both by online searchers and their library managers.

2. General pattern of use

Compared with the 70% of university and polytechnic libraries using online services in 1978, the current position suggests that around 80% now offer, in some way or other, online facilities. Some libraries have integrated online methods into their usual information provision while others are still in an experimental phase. An interesting development is the increased use of these systems for Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) functions.

Several libraries now run regular profiles against specific data bases where before they would have used batch services or, more often, none at all.

3. Charging and budgeting

3.1 Current arguments

The question of charging users for the provision of online services has perhaps aroused more controversy than any other aspect. Neither is the problem confined only to academic libraries; the information broker, the industrial or special library and, particularly, the public library have all had to consider this fundamental question. Recently the Library Association has established a Working Party on Online Charges to assess the implications of budgeting for these services. It includes representatives from all types of libraries - they expect to complete their deliberations by February 1980 and then report to the Library Association.
The problem for charging for online services can be seen as part of a wider (and current) debate on charging for all kinds of library services. A useful bibliography in this area has recently been compiled. (2)

The arguments for charging users for online searches generally centres on two main economic factors. Firstly the capitalistic notion that individuals should be expected to pay for services tailored to their own needs, particularly as in the case of many academic libraries, where such services represent an increased level of service over previous information provision.

Information is an expensive resource, the argument goes, and users should be expected to pay an economic rate for its supply. This rations scarce resources and keeps demand in line with ability to supply. Secondly, there is the expedient but realistic argument that because of increasingly hard-pressed academic library budgets, charging users for online services is the only way that such services can be provided. This is underlined by the inability of cancelling printed abstracting and indexing services. In the earlier survey academic librarians did not see this as a viable proposition with large numbers of users who would still need to carry out manual searches in these tools.

Although in several academic libraries charging is a necessity in allowing the service to be offered at all, cost recovery is partial and oriented to those users with research or departmenal funds. A separate case is that of external users who are frequently charged on a full-cost basis. Indeed many academic libraries now operate as information brokers in their own locality, a service that is effective for small/medium-sized firms without online facilities. It also keeps the academic library's online service 'ticking over' and helps the trained searchers maintain their expertise and keep up with the many developments that are happening with systems and data bases.

In future it seems inevitable that online retrieval costs will begin to rise. As access becomes easier and the number of available data bases grow, there will be moves towards more electronic publishing with a decrease in the availability of conventionally published sources. Publishers will require similar levels of income and will therefore increase their royalty charges. All this will increase the pressure on academic libraries. to institute some kind of chargeback. The growth in the new area of teletext and videotext systems will also exacerbate academic libraries budgetary problems.

3.2 Current academic library practice on charging

Our recent interviews unearthed several important points on charging and budgeting some of which reflect changes over the past two years. A significant polarisation and hardening of attitudes seems to be taking place around the disirability of charges or in the provision of free searches. About 50% of the librarians interviewed worked in libraries where charging existed and either supported this practice as a sensible economic strategy or alternatively saw no other way of being able to offer the service. The other 50% represented libraries which wholly subsidised the cost of online searching, and, as a matter of principle, believed strongly in this policy. Significantly they tended to come from libraries which offered well-developed information and literature searching services before the advent of online, and they see the new technology as much as anything else as facilitating a more efficient and effective service in economising in the use of their own time.

.../5

Their attitudes are summarised by Revill in a paper presented to the previously mentioned Library Association Working Party on Online Charging.

> "I now feel that the use of online services should not be promoted, inhibited or constrained by the use of charges. It should take its chances with other services and be allowed to develop. Allocation of resources to such services should be judged on the same basis as other provision - difficult though this exercise might be."
>
> "Charging singles out one service and makes it different. It suggests overtones of greater efficiency. I would prefer an all or nothing approach - either all (library) services are free or all are charged for so that they can compete on equal terms". (3)

One of our respondents reported that his library (a very large provincial university library) charged users for searches and was looking carefully at the possibility of charging for other expensive services e.g. inter-library loans. He argued that this would dissuade casual or frivolous use.

The number of academic libraries operating some kind of charging system for online services has certainly increased in the last two years from 30% to about 50% - this reflects a general tendency to swing towards a greater element of cost recovery as use of the service expands and as budget pressures increase. It is in these libraries where online services can clearly be seen to be an extension of previously offered information services. This is an argument that can be extended to other kinds of libraries.

Industrial libraries are often faced with similar prospects given that the breadth of information now available online has provided a more far-reaching and pervasive service than previously. Many firms have developed a 'cost-centre' approach to budgeting with specific calls on library services and documents being charged to the particular unit of the company requesting them. In academic libraries too, charging for services generally leads to an accounting exercise with money being shifted from one institutional fund to another with all the consequent administrative costs. The generation of new income from, say, undergraduate or external users tends to be very limited.

3.3 Specific pricing policies

Of the libraries that operate a charging policy there is a wide range of methods and practices in calculating these costs.

(a) Partial cost recovery

There are several variations on this theme but broadly it attempts to recover some of the (explicit) costs but allows the institution to underwrite others, often to ease administration. Costs, therefore, often do not differ between data bases and systems - a blanket charge is levied. This charge dissuades the casual user and orientates the service towards the longer or more difficult search (and to users with research or departmental funding!) It also provides the requester with a broad idea of eventual cost.

Conversely, unsuccessful searches discourage the paying customer from returning.

The charges themselves are usually related to connect time e.g. £1.00 per minute on any system, sometimes with a subsidiary charge for offline prints for those over a certain threshold. Some libraries differentiate between UK and international services where the telecommunication charges are higher. Another tactic is to use the system estimated cost which, though not including telecommunication charges, form an unambiguous base line for charging.

(b) Full cost recovery

This is not a common approach, perhaps because there is little tradition of costing operations down to staff level in academic libraries. Thus full cost recovery would require greater administration and would constitute a break with traditional practice, although it is true that the largest single cost of online searching is in staff time. The cost of conducting the pre-search interview, the follow-up interview, training and the administration is a significant one.

(c) Token charging

This has not been common in UK libraries but can be useful in introducing online services.

It minimises the problem of charging for the unsuccessful search, dissuades the casual user while providing some income. This may be a particularly appropriate strategy when establishing an online service as it also familiarises the user with the concept of charging.

(d) Differential charges

Differential cost recovery i.e. different rates for different user groups in the academic community is quite a common practice in UK academic libraries. It is particularly important to define very carefully the categories of user (undergraduate, postgraduate, academic faculty etc.) to avoid any contention. This general strategy is an attempt to move towards a charging system based on the user's ability to pay. Although this might be appropriate in many cases it can lead to difficult problems of individual negotiation.

(e) Loss leader pricing

This is a way of establishing a responsive market for online services by encouraging use through initially free searches, while instituting charges later. A significant number of UK academic libraries established online services on a free basis during an experimental period, and then have subsequently instituted charges.

(f) Free searching

As we have mentioned earlier about 50% of UK academic libraries currently operate such a service, but only to academic and research staff. Online searching is primarily seen to be inappropriate to undergraduates. The budgets that have been allocated in individual libraries in 1979/80 for this purpose are slightly higher than reported in the earlier survey. (1)

3.4 The relationship between charging and the marketing of online services

In those libraries that do not operate any kind of charges to users, there appears to be a constant tension between supply and demand, and problems over the role of the library in generating more demand by publicity, demonstrations etc. Several respondents said that they did not actively promote online services because of a finite online budget and fears of being swamped by academics and researchers. Awareness of online facilities is generally promoted by word-of-mouth recommendation of other users, but clearly such covert methods leave many potential users uninformed of the availability of these services.

In libraries that charge users the problem of marketing is a less difficult one. A marketing campaign can be launched with the confidence that an appropriate pricing policy will provide useful income as well as moderating demand.

4. Staffing structures

The development of most online information services has been through individuals being allocated specific responsibility for establishing the service - this has often been a middle or junior ranking professional member of staff. These staff frequently were working in the provision of scientific and technical (particularly medical/biomedical) information and library services. As the services grow alternative systems became available and there was expansion in the range of databases, systems and disciplines covered. Staffing in turn developed on different lines. In some libraries staff split between the system command language e.g. Elhill, Dialog. This helps searchers in being intimately familiar with the command language and maximises effectiveness. An alternative split of staff is on a subject basis giving emphasis to the importance of knowledge of individual data bases, their structure and retrieval facilities. Depending on which of the above policies have been adopted, there is great variation in the number of trained searchers in UK academic libraries. In some there are six or seven trained subject specialists, while in other libraries all the searching might be handled by one person. It is difficult to see under the former arrangement with the current level of online searching how individual searchers get anywhere near enough searching time to maintain maximum awareness of methods and data bases. The latter arrangement, however, exemplifies the enhanced role of the academic librarian as that of information consultant with a more prestigous and skillful function than previously [4].

A further point of discussion is the future possible involvement of faculty members in directly accessing the online services. In institutions without a strong central information service and which rely on cost recovery techniques, it is evident that there are advantages in high frequency academic users undertaking searching themselves. This is particularly the case where departments are already involved in online retrieval of non bibliographic data.

5. A general evaluation of the role of online services in UK academic libraries

Our respondents were asked for their general feelings about the role of online services in their own libraries as they have developed over the last two years. It is difficult to generalise about a wide range of comments but common strands appeared. Firstly, in terms of the amount of time spent in each library on all aspects of online services, and in the amount of the libraries' total services. The median total time per week (during term time) spent online to the major systems is 35 minutes. Even after allowing for the total library staff time involved in providing the service, online searching accounts for a tiny part of academic libraries resources. Most libraries have come to terms with what online systems can and can not do, and they are increasingly being fully integrated into normal reference and information services.

Some respondents expressed unease about their own retrieval performance on specific data bases. This is perhaps explained by the small amount of online time that searchers are currently operating.

Clearly, the more frequent the use of a data base is, the more effective and efficient will be the retrieval performance. This is perhaps also a pointer to the increasing development of specialised training programmes relating to the use of specific databases. However, the cost of such courses, coupled with the necessity to cover a range of disciplines within the academic context, may be inappropriate. Indeed the emerging role of national and local user groups may be a better solution.

References

(1) Akeroyd, J. and Foster, A. Online information services in UK academic libraries. Online Review 3 (2), 1979, p 195-204.

(2) British Library, Library Association Library. Charges for library services: a select annotated bibliography. The Association, 1979. Preliminary edition.

(3) Revill, D.H. Online services: the questions and arguments from an academic library point of view. Unpublished paper to Library Association Working Party on Online Charging, October 1979. (LSc305)

(4) De Gennaro, R. Impact of on-line services on the academic library in Kent, A. and Galvin, T.J. Online Revolution in Libraries. Dekker, 1978.

November 1979